

Navajo Nation plans tax on junk food to encourage healthier eating habits

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.10.15

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Students and faculty say the Pledge of Allegiance during an assembly at the Crystal Boarding School in Crystal, New Mexico, in the Navajo Nation, Sept. 26, 2014. Photo: AP Photo/John Locher

On a weekday shopping trip to the only real grocery store within 30 miles of her home, Ann Neagle paused before a bag of Red Delicious apples that cost \$7 per dozen. But the apples were discounted. The Navajo Nation, which governs the Navajo Indian tribe, had lifted the 5 percent sales tax on fresh fruits and vegetables.

It's part of the tribe's attempt to help people eat healthier food. Too many Navajo are overweight, and diabetes and heart disease are big problems. The tribe also plans to put a 2 percent tax on junk food.

Living In A "Food Desert"

That tax, the first of its kind nationwide, will hit one of the most economically depressed areas of the country, where more than 40 percent of people are unemployed. Neagle is worried.

"Less money for fruits is nice, but it doesn't even out," she said. "For people on a fixed income, we can't afford things to get more expensive."

Neagle is not alone. About 42 percent of the Navajo Nation lives below the federal poverty line. The U.S. government has declared parts of the vast reservation a "food desert," which means it's difficult to find affordable or good quality fresh food. For many in the tribe, a limited budget and few stores to choose from mean gas stations and convenience stores are their primary grocers.

For the \$7 she could spend on a dozen apples, Neagle, 54, could stretch her money further by purchasing prepared and processed foods. Seven dollars would buy more than 30 boxes of ramen noodles or seven frozen dinners — one of which carried 480 calories and one-third of the daily dietary recommendations for sodium and fat.

What Exactly Is Junk Food?

Many people across the country — college students, the working poor and those, like Neagle, whose access to fresh produce is limited — face similar problems. But a health epidemic among the Navajo reservation's 175,000 residents moved lawmakers here to give the junk food tax a try.

The tribe hasn't set a date for the tax to go into effect. A tribal tax commission still has to give its final approval, but no one expects that to be a problem.

It has not been easy to nail down what is junk food and what is not. Tribal council members said the soft drink industry urged them to keep soda and sports drinks out of the legislation.

They resisted, and now those drinks are known as "minimal-to-no nutritional value food." Other items on the list include frozen desserts, fried food, potato chips and candy.

"It's not going to do anything except make it more expensive," said Preston Yazzie, 20. "I'll still buy chips or whatever. But maybe it'll help some people."

"Crazy For Those Hot Cheetos"

One mile from where Navajo government leaders work, Bashas' Grocery sits on tribal land. Most of the items in the front of the store, and the items that are advertised in a weekly newspaper, would be subject to the new tax.

Racks of canned Vienna sausage and corned beef hash greeted shoppers. Behind them was a huge selection of sodas, such as Coke and Pepsi, and discount brands like Fiesta, which would all be taxed. The rest of the store was similar to a typical grocery layout, though processed items such as chicken nuggets appeared in the meat aisle.

Shoppers “go crazy for those hot Cheetos,” a grocery clerk said.

The store’s arrangement and selection concerned community health advocate Denisa Livingston. She decided to give tribal government officials tours to show them how few healthy products were available.

But local residents do seem to understand what's going on. A Navajo Nation survey found 74 percent of people on the reservation think health problems are caused by the lack of healthy food.

Health Is "A Long Haul"

Legislator Jonathan Nez knows firsthand about the power of healthy eating. Four years ago, he weighed 300 pounds and ate a junk-filled diet.

He started eating healthy and lost weight. He also rides his bike and runs, two activities almost unimaginable to him in 2010.

"If they put this tax in front of me then, I probably would have opposed it," Nez said with a laugh. "I know I would have."

He added, "It's a long haul. But we'll get there."

To understand how the Navajo Nation found itself in a health crisis, it's important to understand its relationship with food.

Navajo society used to depend on farming, a fact reflected in the story of the tribe's beginning: A starving people from another world were met by a turkey, who shook out four corn kernels from beneath its wings, saving the population from hunger.

A Turning Point?

Navajo society relied on sheep and cattle, as well as corn. Then, in the 1920s and '30s, the U.S. government began setting limits on livestock, explained at the time as a way to preserve eroding and overgrazed soil.

On the reservation, just 7 percent of residents have a college degree, making it significantly harder for them to get a job.

Supporters of the junk food tax hope it will mark a turning point for the country's largest tribe. Money will go into a community health fund to pay for physical improvements on the reservation and educational programming.

Livingston said the money could also be spent on farmers markets and vegetable gardens, exercise equipment, community food cooperatives and youth health and sports clubs.

Quiz

- 1 Which selection explains a major obstacle to the increased availability of healthy food in the Navajo Nation?
- (A) One mile from where Navajo government leaders work, Bashas' Grocery sits on tribal land. Most of the items in the front of the store, and the items that are advertised in a weekly newspaper, would be subject to the new tax.
 - (B) "Less money for fruits is nice, but it doesn't even out," she said. "For people on a fixed income, we can't afford things to get more expensive."
 - (C) About 42 percent of the Navajo Nation lives below the federal poverty line. The U.S. government has declared parts of the vast reservation a "food desert," which means it's difficult to find affordable or good quality fresh food. For many in the tribe, a limited budget and few stores to choose from mean gas stations and convenience stores are their primary grocers.
 - (D) For the \$7 she could spend on a dozen apples, Neagle, 54, could stretch her money further by purchasing prepared and processed foods. Seven dollars would buy more than 30 boxes of ramen noodles or seven frozen dinners — one of which carried 480 calories and one-third of the daily dietary recommendations for sodium and fat.
- 2 Select the paragraph from the section "Crazy For Those Hot Cheetos" that shows most people would probably support the new tax rules.
- 3 Which answer option identifies two main ideas from the article?
- (A) The Navajo Nation is planning to tax unhealthy foods ; many Navajo eat mostly unhealthy foods because they are cheaper.
 - (B) The Navajo Nation is planning to tax unhealthy foods ; eating unhealthy foods can lead to health problems like diabetes.
 - (C) Many members of the Navajo Nation live in poverty ; they eat unhealthy foods because they are cheaper.
 - (D) Many members of the Navajo Nation live in poverty ; eating unhealthy foods can lead to health problems like diabetes.

Which selection would make the BEST summary of the article?

- (A) On a weekday shopping trip to the only real grocery store within 30 miles of her home, Ann Neagle paused before a bag of Red Delicious apples that cost \$7 per dozen. But the apples were discounted.
- (B) The Navajo Nation, which governs the Navajo Indian tribe, had lifted the 5 percent sales tax on fresh fruits and vegetables. It's part of the tribe's attempt to help people eat healthier food. Too many Navajo are overweight, and diabetes and heart disease are big problems.
- (C) Navajo society used to depend on farming, a fact reflected in the story of the tribe's beginning: A starving people from another world were met by a turkey, who shook out four corn kernels from beneath its wings, saving the population from hunger.
- (D) Supporters of the junk food tax hope it will mark a turning point for the country's largest tribe. Money will go into a community health fund to pay for physical improvements on the reservation and educational programming.

Answer Key

- 1 Which selection explains a major obstacle to the increased availability of healthy food in the Navajo Nation?
- (A) One mile from where Navajo government leaders work, Bashas' Grocery sits on tribal land. Most of the items in the front of the store, and the items that are advertised in a weekly newspaper, would be subject to the new tax.
 - (B) "Less money for fruits is nice, but it doesn't even out," she said. "For people on a fixed income, we can't afford things to get more expensive."
 - (C) **About 42 percent of the Navajo Nation lives below the federal poverty line. The U.S. government has declared parts of the vast reservation a "food desert," which means it's difficult to find affordable or good quality fresh food. For many in the tribe, a limited budget and few stores to choose from mean gas stations and convenience stores are their primary grocers.**
 - (D) For the \$7 she could spend on a dozen apples, Neagle, 54, could stretch her money further by purchasing prepared and processed foods. Seven dollars would buy more than 30 boxes of ramen noodles or seven frozen dinners — one of which carried 480 calories and one-third of the daily dietary recommendations for sodium and fat.
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Paragraph 15:

But local residents do seem to understand what's going on. A Navajo Nation survey found 74 percent of people on the reservation think health problems are caused by the lack of healthy food.

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Which selection would make the BEST summary of the article?

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